

# THE INTEGRAL ROLE OF RELATIONSHIPS IN RIGHT CARE ALLIANCE'S HEALTHCARE ACTIVISM



## Case Study 2022

This case study is part of a series developed by [People Power Health](#) in collaboration with the [Leading Change Network's](#) Health Justice Community.

You can learn more about community organizing for health in our Health Justice Guide.

Our special thanks to the LCN Health Justice Community team members for their generosity in sharing their experiences creating meaningful impact to stop health inequities and bring health justice.

If you are a health activist interested in embracing community organizing in your work, get connected to [People Power Health](#).

Visit the [LCN Resource Center](#) to learn more about Community Organizing and find more organizing resources and case studies.

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**Stephanie Aines**

Director of Organizing  
and Training

*“We want a completely transformed healthcare system, one in which people have a strong local primary care network, no matter where they live, where decisions are very much between a person and their clinical team.”*

## OVERVIEW

The Right Care Alliance (RCA) is a nationwide grassroots coalition with a powerful objective: to hold health care institutions accountable to communities and make patients the focus of health care, not profit margins. The group’s recent campaigns include fighting high insulin costs and withdrawing FDA approval for Aduhelm.

R I G H T C A R E  
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## Finding Cohesion as a Grassroots Healthcare Organization in a Challenging Environment

As the sole staff person at RCA, Stephanie Aines wears many hats. You'll find her facilitating groups, training, and coaching. She writes grants, mails out t-shirts, and conducts one-on-one meetings. Much of what Aines does is rooted in the five practices that comprise Marshall Ganz's framework for relational organizing.

Of those five practices, relationship building is of particular importance, especially considering the two primary challenges facing many health justice groups today.

The first challenge is how difficult COVID-19 has made it to build a sense of community for RCA's regional hubs. While the RCA team has long maintained this network of regional hubs, the group has found it challenging to maintain momentum and cohesion—and to have the big community conversations they envision—since COVID-19 has pushed most meetings online.

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*“For example, at one point our plans were to address surprise medical bills with direct action—going to hospital billing offices, or talking with lawyers who work with people at debt clinics,” says Aines. “That was when COVID hit and we quickly found that in-person action wasn’t feasible.”*



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The second challenge was keeping members engaged despite the polarized experience most of them have had with the healthcare system. On the one hand, many are directly affected by health injustices and have urgent medical needs. Often an RCA member will have a medical need come up, or get a coveted medical appointment, and need to prioritize their health over organizing for the rest of the day or week. Yet, they also know that addressing those needs without changing the fundamental system won't make a lasting difference for other people.

The fact is, it's difficult for people to feel like they're effecting change in a field (healthcare justice) where the work is really hard—where staffing and budget is so limited, for one. Where one's own family members have succumbed to COVID-19, or felt firsthand the consequences of insulin rationing.



***“The most effective leaders enable other people to make some kind of change, even if that change is just attending the next meeting.”***



## Stitching Together Enduring Relationships Among Members

To weather the storm, so to speak—to keep members engaged despite a distributed leadership team with limited resources—Aines and her team look for engaged people with demonstrated experience in relationship-building. “Without the relationships, it would be difficult to keep on,” says Aines. “Most people volunteer their time and resources tend to be slim. Relationships are the glue that hold us together.”

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It was through relationships that Aines herself found RCA in the first place. Aines met Dr. Pedja Stojcic, Executive Director of People Power Health while they were teaching together with prof. Marshall Ganz. “Even before People Power Health was formalized, we worked together on leadership training for our RCA members,” says Aines. Indeed, it’s relationships with people that allows us to combine resources, tap into each other’s networks, and make change. Relationships help us open the possibilities that we were not able to see before.

Today she helps move the group forward based on the same principle. “We still have a core leadership team of eight members. These are people who’ve been involved in RCA campaigns for years or months. But we’re also adapting our regional structure to accommodate the new relationships we’re building across the country.”



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Aines emphasizes that relationship building must be sustained over time.

*“It comes in a lot of different forms. It’s like thousands of little stitches that add up over time to reinforce long-lasting relationships. This is the reason people stay. It’s the community. The network and friendships. For our members, RCA is where they can come to share their feelings about the state of the world and politics and healthcare.”*



Over the past couple of years, relationship building has taken on many different forms at RCA, including:

- Story-sharing one-to-ones
- Weekly virtual/in-home meetings
- Regional or topic-based summits
- Small group discussions
- Grief vigils and coffee hours
- Picnics and potlucks



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Moving forward, the hard work will not abate for the RCA team. Inequities revealed by the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as rising insulin costs, remain hot-button issues in the U.S. The RCA has also campaigned against Aduhelm, a controversial Alzheimer's drug that was rushed to approval.

Accepting that much of their work is now remote, the RCA team is trying to be creative about how to keep building relationships, keep existing relationships strong, and move forward. Regardless of what new healthcare issues arise, or how the group interacts on a daily basis, it will be the strength of its relationships that will help RCA endure.

